

1968

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Recommended Citation

Kendrick, F. J. (1968). The Politics of Selecting Convention Delegates. *Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science*, Vol. 35 No.2, 151-154.

Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas/vol35/iss2/25>

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The Politics of Selecting Convention Delegates

FRANK J. KENDRICK*

ABSTRACT — This is a case study of a recent political contest in Clay County, Minnesota, over selection of delegates to the State Democratic Farmer-Labor convention. The study indicates that the process of delegate selection in Minnesota is, at best, often a controlled and largely unrepresentative process.

The following study examines two facets of a political conflict in Minnesota in 1968: An attempt by the Concerned Democrats in Clay County to elect state convention delegates favorable to the nomination of Senator Eugene McCarthy for President; and the reaction of the regular Party Democrats to this attempt.

The effort began in the latter part of February, 1968, and culminated in failure at the Clay County D.F.L. convention April 6. (In Minnesota, the Democratic Party is known as Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, or D.F.L.) This is also a study of a conflict between a group composed largely of political amateurs, and a group composed largely of political professionals, with the professionals winning out.

The author of this study was chairman of the Clay County D.F.L. Central Committee at the time of this conflict, which lasted for approximately four and a half weeks.

Background of a Movement

The Minnesota Concerned Democratic movement, at least as it operated within Clay County during the months of February and March, 1968, was in many respects a mass movement in the sense of a moral crusade, with the objective not only of changing President Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam war policy, but also of remaking the entire Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota. In other words, it set out to abolish the "machine" and to create an entirely new party structure, as well as to help Senator Eugene McCarthy secure the Presidential nomination at the Democratic national convention in August.

The earliest professed objective of the Minnesota Concerned Democratic movement was to try to capture the precinct caucuses within the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. A precinct caucus is important because it is there that delegates to ward and county party conventions are selected. If one group can control enough caucuses, it can also dictate the selection of delegates to the district and state conventions and eventually to the national nominating convention. Since Minnesota has no presidential preference primary, control of caucuses is necessary if a group backing a particular candidate hopes to have any influence at the national convention.

Minnesota precinct caucuses are open to almost anyone who wishes to attend, since the statutory restrictions are either stated in such general terms or are so qualified as to make them practically unenforceable. In fact, the

only meaningful limitation is that which makes it illegal for a person to participate in more than one party's caucuses in the same year. Thus it is possible to flood caucuses with large numbers of individuals who may only profess to be Minnesota voters for the next general election or who may, until the time of the caucus, have been actively associated with another party.

According to press reports just two weeks before the caucuses, the Concerned Democrats were working to capture precinct caucuses in order to elect ward and county convention delegates favorable to the nomination of Senator Eugene McCarthy. (*The Forum, Fargo-Moorhead*, Feb. 20, 1968). Their overall objective was to deal the Johnson Administration an embarrassing political defeat in the home state of Vice President Hubert Humphrey, with the further hope of changing the President's Vietnam War policy. At the time this goal seemed unrealistic because it was not generally assumed that the President would reverse his policy, while it was assumed that he would be renominated in August.

The Sequence in Clay County

Pre-caucus planning began in Clay County at least four weeks prior to the March 5 precinct caucuses, the call having been issued by the D.F.L. State Chairman on February 3. As county chairman, the author began distributing the caucus kits to almost anyone who would take them in the 49 precincts of the county. This is no easy task, because few persons are willing to take the trouble to post the required notices and convene the caucuses. Unless there is some specific cause which attracts attendance, a typical rural caucus may consist of the convener and his family, and even an urban caucus may not draw more than a half dozen persons.

The Concerned Democrats, and other 1968 McCarthy supporters in Clay County, intensified their caucus activity at least two weeks prior to March 5. The coordinator for the planning was a Moorhead State College humanities professor who was also a member of the steering committee of Minnesota Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam. Despite publicized denials, (*The Forum, Fargo-Moorhead*, Feb. 25, 1968), interested people were being contacted in the City of Moorhead and were being urged to attend their caucuses in order to express an anti-War stand. The high point of the pre-caucus planning came with a visit to Moorhead on February 28 by Mrs. Alpha J. Smaby, a State Representative and a member of the Concerned Democrats' Steering Committee.

The regular party Democrats became aware of the ex-

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tent of planning no earlier than March 3, by which time it was too late to conduct effective organizational work in most of Moorhead's precincts.

The caucus results came as a great shock to party regulars, and probably also surprised the McCarthy supporters. In Moorhead, McCarthy backers captured five of eight precincts which held approximately 65 out of 100 convention votes, and elected a few delegates in other precincts as well. This was accomplished simply by flooding the caucuses with instructed voters. In most cases, the McCarthy voters had met beforehand, had prepared lists of delegates and alternates, and then had easily dominated the caucus proceedings.

In precincts where caucus attendance had been minimal in previous years, as many as 40 or 50 instructed McCarthy voters attended on Mar. 5. In the face of such strength, the largely unorganized administration backers had no chance to be elected as delegates. But while working in the City, the Concerned Democrats had failed to organize the rural and village precincts in Clay county, with the result that they elected less than ten delegates outside the City. This meant that McCarthy backers at best could legitimately claim only about seventy-five convention votes in the county. Because exactly half of Clay County's two hundred D.F.L. county convention votes come from outside the city of Moorhead, the task of the party regulars, was to secure almost all of the rural and village votes.

It is worth noting that developments in Moorhead followed a statewide pattern. That is, most of the McCarthy delegates elected at the caucuses were faculty members at Moorhead State College and Concordia College, their wives, and a few students. Very few of these delegates represented the community outside the colleges. Similar situations developed in other Minnesota college towns, and in the University area.

Following the precinct caucuses, little planning was done on either side for several days. Among the regular party Democrats and administration supporters, nothing was done until after a visit to Moorhead by Warren Spannaus, State D.F.L. Chairman, on March 9. He had been invited early to speak to a Seventh District Young D.F.L. convention on the Moorhead State College campus. In addition to speaking to the largely hostile group of Young Democrats, Spannaus also spent several hours in discussion with party officers. That was when the decision was made to withhold the remaining lists of rural delegates from the Concerned Democrats and the press. The reason for withholding the lists was, as Spannaus stated, to allow him "to make first contacts with newly-elected delegates." (*The Forum, Fargo-Moorhead*, March 12, 1968.) He explained also that he wanted to use the Party organization as a "stabilizing force" and to prevent the divisiveness of pro-McCarthy delegate recruiting. (*The Minneapolis Tribune*, March 13, 1968.) The lists were finally released to the public on March 20, after most delegates had been contacted by party workers, and after the personal intervention of Senator Walter F. Mondale of Minnesota.

After the state chairman left Moorhead, the author spent most of the next three days touring rural precincts with other party workers in order to explain to delegates the

situation which had developed and to urge them to attend the county convention on April 6. A general rural reaction against what had happened in the city soon became apparent, as well as a generally widespread support for the Johnson Administration. The out-county residents felt that the D.F.L. party was in danger of being "taken over" by college people having little or no concern for the problems of Clay county. There was also a fear that if and when Senator McCarthy should fail to receive the Democratic nomination in August, the newcomers would desert the party.

In the meantime, the Concerned Democrats also were actively organizing for the convention. It became apparent, within two days after the caucuses, that their first goal was to elect all of Clay County's ten delegates to the state convention. They did not publicly organize as a group, however, until March 14, when they set up an eleven-member steering committee and called themselves the Concerned Democrats in Clay. The group included obvious overrepresentation of college faculty and students, and it was so loosely set up that the steering committee failed to designate a chairman or any single spokesman. It was not, in fact, until a week before the county convention that the steering committee finally selected a "coordinator" to speak for it.

One early move of the Concerned Democrats was an attempt to talk the regular county chairman into helping them get McCarthy delegates in return for a promise to support re-election of the chairman. This was turned down as being unrealistic, and also because of pressure to "hold the line" from Vice-President Humphrey's office, the State D.F.L. Chairman, and local Party regulars.

Then, the Concerned Democrats worked diligently to build up delegate support in the precincts outside Moorhead. Although hampered by not being able to see the out-county delegate lists, they learned the names of most of the delegates anyway and became confident that they could secure a majority of votes.

However, the Concerned Democrats were plagued with factionalism from the very beginning of their campaign. Their group consisted of at least three factions, including opportunists who wished to use the movement to gain political power, extreme zealots who wished to remake Minnesota politics, and others who wished only to induce change in President Johnson's Vietnam War policy. There never was a true consensus of goals, yet the Concerned Democrats met on a regular, every-other-night basis and kept in very close contact with each other.

As for the party Democrats, they met approximately once a week during the period before the convention. Most of their time was spent in contacting rural delegates and developing the support needed to control the convention. Several specific tactics were developed and used during the campaign. First and most important was the effort to organize delegates on a pro-Administration appeal. Key people were contacted and seen in all areas of the County, and these people were in turn asked to contact delegates in neighboring precincts. On the average, each key person was assigned about five rural townships or villages. These key people were responsible for keeping

in touch with all delegates in their respective areas. By the final week before the convention, a surprisingly effective rural organization existed for the first time in the D.F.L. Party in Clay County.

A second tactic was to develop issues which would be of interest to rural delegates, the most important being to "save" the D.F.L. party from domination by the colleges and the City of Moorhead. The rural resentment was already there—what was needed was a certain amount of encouragement of rural feelings.

The other issue was that of helping the Minnesota farmer regain his voice within the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party. Because the Party organization in the Twin Cities was being taken over by the McCarthy supporters, it appeared that the rural districts of the State might have an unusual opportunity to influence the state convention and the party's policies. This situation was presented as an opportunity that might never come again. On the other side, the Concerned Democrats were consistently pictured as narrowly-based, interested only in the one issue of the War, and determined to take control of everything possible. They were, in other words, pictured as an enemy which had to be defeated at the coming convention.

A third tactic was for the regular county chairman to make frequent appearances on radio and television, to release statements to the press, and to write letters to the editors of local papers. Most of these public statements were based upon the same theme, that is, that the Concerned Democrats were trying to use the D.F.L. party for their own purposes and that they refused to compromise on a mixed slate of delegates to the state convention. The communications media seemed delighted to play up the controversy as much as possible, giving both sides a platform.

Along with appealing to the issues in which the rural delegates were interested, a decision was made on March 25 to move the convention to one of the rural villages. The alternative was a new site in the City of Moorhead where most of the McCarthy votes were located. The village of Hawley, some 17 miles east of Moorhead, was chosen in order to appeal to the rural delegates.

A final tactic was to set up the preliminary convention committees in such a way as to benefit the party Democrats. Since the county chairman is authorized to perform this task, it was possible to appoint committees with a majority of party Democrats on each. But Concerned Democrats were appointed to all committees.

When President Johnson made his historic announcement on March 31, 1968, that he would not seek reelection and was going to concentrate on de-escalating the Vietnam War, the logical expectation was lessened tension between the Concerned Democrats and the regulars. But in fact, the Concerned Democrats became determined not only to go for state convention delegates, but also for the entire party organization. Tactics designed to frustrate their efforts had succeeded in antagonizing them to the point where compromise or settlement became virtually impossible. Thus, the Concerned Democrats decided to nominate a full slate of Party officers plus delegates and alternates to the state convention.

During the last week before the county convention, special plans were made to ensure that regular rural and city delegates would attend the convention. A calling committee was set up to contact all delegates in the forty-eight hour period prior to the convention. Also, lists of the nominees for party office and delegate and alternate positions were prepared and distributed to practically all convention delegates during the last three days by the regular Democrats.

The convention began almost exactly as the Party Democrats had planned. Delegates came from all but one rural precinct. With an estimated 33 votes from the City of Moorhead, a majority of between 110 and 120 votes was calculated to between 70 and 80 for the McCarthy supporters.

The Concerned Democrats quickly recognized that majority, and began to act accordingly. They tried to persuade majority delegates to change their votes, and after a three-minute time limit on floor speeches was adopted, the McCarthy supporters subsequently walked out after charging that the convention was "illegal and undemocratic."

Other details of the county convention are not relevant to this study. It need only be said that the great majority of McCarthy delegates returned to the convention floor after deciding not to hold a "rump" convention. They nominated a full slate of delegates and alternates, and candidates for Chairman and Chairwoman. But the votes for delegates and party officers demonstrate how prior planning and organization of a convention can produce desired results. The pro-Administration delegates received from 109 to 118 votes, while the pro-McCarthy delegates received only 52 to 80 votes apiece. For County Chairman, the vote was 119 for the incumbent, and 73 for the opposing candidate.

The results of the convention warranted this headline in *The Forum, Fargo-Moorhead*, of April 8: "From Veteran Clay DFLers, McCarthy Supporters Received a Lesson in Convention Control."

Observations on Nature of Conflict

It is difficult to be objective when drawing conclusions about a situation in which one is personally involved, yet several observations are in order.

Regarding the Concerned Democrats, the chief criticism to be made is that they were from the beginning completely uncompromising in attempting to achieve their first goal: the selection of ten pro-McCarthy delegates. A proposal to discuss the possibility of electing a mixed delegation was rejected. It was in the unwillingness to compromise that the Concerned Democrats took on the characteristics of a mass movement.

They also broadened their goal from that of changing President Johnson's mind to that of rebuilding the entire Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party.

In Clay County, the Concerned Democrats represented mainly the two colleges in Moorhead. On that basis, they could hardly be expected to build a party strong enough to offer a serious challenge to the more broadly-based Republican Party of that area.

The Party Democrats are to be severely criticized, too, however. Their approach was, from the beginning, a reac-

tion to something they did not understand. They also demonstrated an almost fanatical fear of what the Concerned Democrats were attempting to do. This made communication between the two groups difficult and only tended to develop an uncompromising attitude on the part of the Party Democrats.

Thus the Party Democrats became as narrow-minded and uncompromising as their opponents. Their goals were primarily two: first, to preserve their Party organization; and, second, to elect state convention delegates favorable to the Johnson administration. Of the two, probably the first was most important. This means that if the Concerned Democrats could somehow have assured the Party regulars that they were not after their organization, some of the tensions might have been avoided.

It should be stated that early compromise between the two sides could probably have produced an acceptable "mixed" slate of delegates to the state D.F.L. convention.

This in turn would have guaranteed a fairer representation of opinions not only in Clay County, but elsewhere as well. As the situation developed, the Administration supporters did have a majority of votes at the state convention, and thus were able to dictate the selection of most of Minnesota's national convention delegates.

The net result of a conflict such as that which occurred in Clay County is that no one can really estimate how accurately opinions will be represented in conventions at all levels. The selection of delegates in many cases is only a reflection of the organizing efforts of particular factions. Thus, the process of delegate selection is, at best, either a controlled or haphazard, and largely unrepresentative process.

References

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- The Minneapolis Tribune*, 1968.